Strike Witches Afrika

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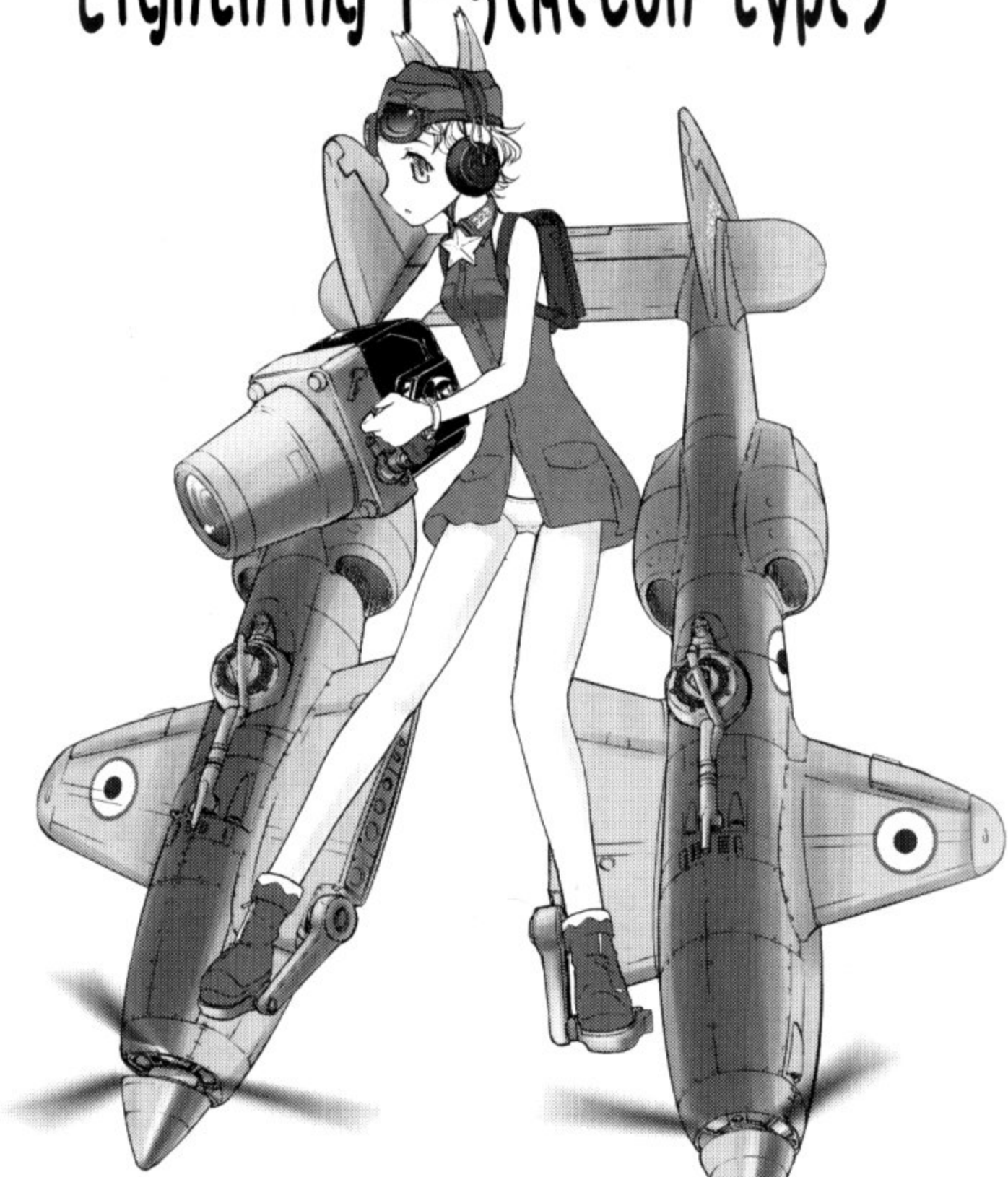
アフリカの星

Der Stern von Afrika

すとらいくうぃっちず

ニぼれ話

Lightning F-5(Recon type)



Sous-Lieutenant
Antoinette de Saint-Exupéry

Illustration: Matsuda Mirai

Chapter 1 - Afrika

Hot.

It's so hot that I won't stop sweating, even if I just stood around quietly. And if I move around, I'll only start sweating more.

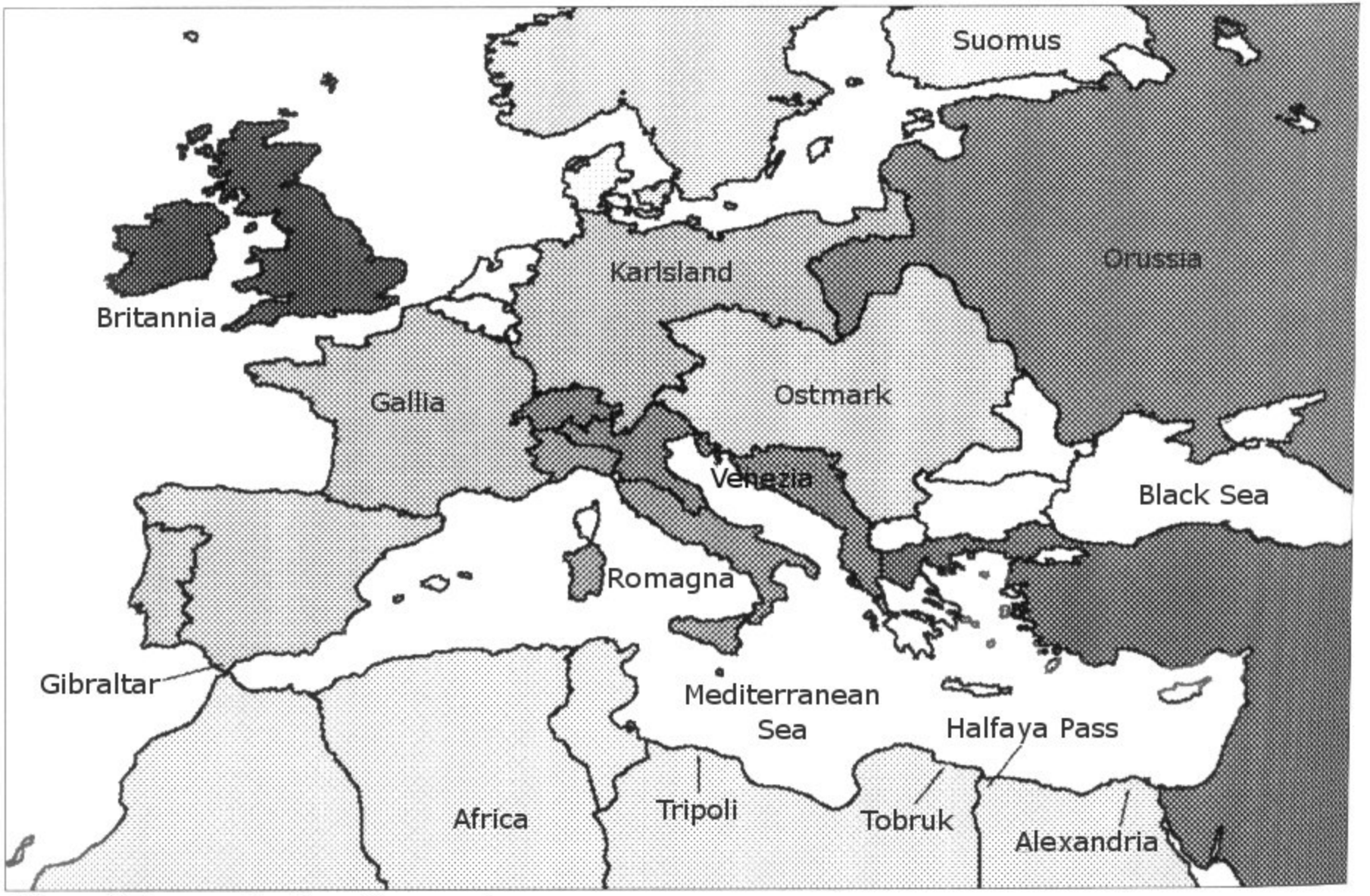
Not only that, the sand around my feet is like a burning hell under the blazing sun. I feel like an egg in a frying pan, sunny-side-up.

This is Tobruk, a strategically important city in Africa. Ever since the time of the Roman Empire, it has been an influential colony in Cyrenaica, and a central meeting point for caravans. Even now, there is a fortress, the largest port in Cyrenaica, and even an airbase, so it is where the Afrikakorps of the Allied Human Forces has been stationed.

Although the city is situated 3000 km from the opening of the Mediterranean Sea at Gibraltar, the city is still easily supplied by the Principality of Venezia from the Isle of Crete not far from the coast. Because the

Neuroi try to stay as far away from the shore as possible, it's relatively safe to resupply the forces stationed in Africa so long as a proper route is chosen.

However, the foremost defensive line against the Neuroi at Halfaya Pass is a mere 140 km away. A distance that a land battle type Neuroi, or even worse, an aerial type Neuroi, could cover in but a moment's time.



Map of Europe (before the war)

The Neuroi appeared out of nowhere in 1939, when they began a serious invasion against humanity. Their first troops came flying from near the Black Sea, emerging from the Neuroi hives floating in the air.

The European countries held out for as long as they could, but Ostmark, directly in the line of the invasion, was the first to fall. In winter of the same year, the invasion of Suomus in Northern Europe began, and by 1940, the entirety of the Karlsländer forces were fighting grueling defensive battles along the former border of Ostmark.

Against the overwhelming power of the Neuroi invasion, the Karlsländer forces faced defeat after defeat, and in June, Berlin fell to the Neuroi. The dogged determination of the Witches in holding back the Neuroi advance allowed the evacuation of the populace and the imperial family to the industrial capital of Neu Karlsland in South Liberion to be carried out with some success. However, with the defeat of the strongest military force in Europe, the neighboring country of Gallia was like a candle before the wind.

Meanwhile, the Neuroi which headed south from the Black Sea arrived in Egypt in September 1940. The Britannian forces, fearing the loss of their communications network to India, shored up their defenses, but with their main focus on the defense of Gallia, the Britannian forces were severely undermanned.

Unsurprisingly, Egypt soon fell to the invaders.

Some of the Karlsländer forces aiding in the retreat from Europe headed to the support of Britannia at their request and fell back to the south, crossing the Mediterranean Sea into Cyrenaica. At the same time, the Principality of Romagna dispatched military support as well, and the Allied Army known as the Afrikakorps was established.

On the seas, the main forces were provided by the Royal Navy of the Principality of Romagna and the Britannian Navy, with logistical support from far-off Liberion and Neu Karlsland on the New World. Even with additional manpower and supplies, humanity was barely able to force a deadlock on the situation. This was due in large part to the shortage of Witches. Most Britannian Witches, in particular Air Infantry, were

reserved for the defense of the main Britannian Isles; only some Armored Ground Infantry were dispatched to Northern Africa.

Romagna and Venezia had their main forces in the Alps, where their combined forces were tasked to block off the Neuroi's advance to the south no matter what. The Fuso Empire also had most of its forces sent to aid Orussia in the Ural Mountains, but with the sudden appearance of a new wave of Neuroi in Siberia, they were fully engaged and could hardly maneuver. Only the European Expeditionary Fleet sent during the early stages of the Great War, and the Imperial Army Air Service European Expeditionary Force, were free to act in Europe. Karlsland was the only country which could send Air Infantry to the European mainland. However, they paid dearly for that ability, as the price was their own homeland.

Before I came here, I had heard news of a witch who was building up a brilliant service record in Africa. As a war correspondent, I had decided to publish her story for the rest of the world to know, so I had taken the long journey from the Fuso Empire here to Africa.

Departing from the port at Yokosuka, it was a month and a half long voyage to Britannia. Along the way, our ship ran headlong into a raging storm just past the Cape of Good Hope, during which I would not have been surprised at all if the ship had sunk any second. It would have been so much easier if the Suez Canal could still be used. Going that way, I could have shortened the trip by half a month.

When I arrived in Britannia, I tried to wait for another ship to Africa, but was told that I would have to wait another half a month.

With little other choice, I decided not to waste any time in Britannia, and found bits and pieces of all sorts of rumors. I even heard tales of the plans to assemble elite witches from countries around the world under a joint command. Well, I doubt it would be so easy. Every nation has their own opinions and plans, and it will most likely take some time for the various leaders and commanders to come to terms.

Of course, I had heard that a volunteer force assembled from several countries was currently active in Suomus.

Perhaps those rumors were pointing to an organization similar to that, hmm?

While I was collecting information, I was able to meet Witches from my own country, from both the Imperial Army and Imperial Navy.

On the Imperial Army side, I ran into Chuu-i Suwa Masuzu of Independent Air Squadron 47. I found that she had been deployed to Europe, and was also testing a prototype Striker unit, the Ki-60. The magic engine in the Ki-60 is the DB601A, an engine widely used in Karlsland. This may certainly be the most suitable engine to use in Europe.

She had a demeanor so gentle she couldn't be identified as a soldier, a tender personality, and a delicate way of speaking. She talked to me happily about her two sisters, both of whom were witches as well. After using my trusty Leica II camera to take a photograph of her, she asked if I could send a copy to her sisters, but I would not be going back to Fuso for some time yet. I did make sure to let her know that I had no idea when they would receive the photographs though.

Next, the Navy Witch I met was stationed with the near legendary Reval Air Group, Chuu-i Sakamoto Mio. She was participating in the development of the Navy's mainstay Striker, the Type Zero Carrier Fighter, when war broke out; the ace who scrambled in a prototype model to intercept the Neuroi.

She told me about how she was still fighting at Reval, while also helping with the development of new Strikers, which is why she would regularly bring her testing data to the research labs in Britannia. Since she was busy, we did not have much of a conversation, but her cheerful laugh left a powerful impression on me. She was a pleasant witch with a refreshingly frank personality, and a very caring attitude. I would have welcomed the chance to speak with her at length.

Not long after I gathered all of this information, a ship that I could board to Africa had finished preparations to depart. However, it was a ship so old, I couldn't help wondering if it would really be able to bring us all the way to Africa.

As if in answer to my thoughts, the ship made port at Gibraltar for repairs. I took the opportunity to make my own inquiries into my destination, and bought the equipment I would need in the deserts of Africa. It would be too late to get everything I needed when I arrived.

Facing the heat and the blazing sun, and violent sand storms that could change the surroundings in an instant, I had to do everything I could to ensure that my skin was not exposed.

I purchased a scarf used by the nomads there, and some military issue goggles, which covered me up nicely. Wrapped up like that, a person wouldn't be able to tell if I were a man or a woman from my appearance, though I suppose that might be best for me.

Even so, sand and dust could still manage to slip in from all over the place, and I expected to be swimming in sand soon enough. Honestly, it was one of the worst places to be.

My ship arrived at last, and covered in my gear, I was finally standing at the port in Tobruk. As for the ship, by the time it arrived, it was almost ready for the scrap heap . Unbelievable.

I had come all the way to Africa from the Fuso Empire for one purpose: to meet the legendary witch, the 'Star of Africa'.

She was an accomplished Witch serving here in Africa, who shone as bright as a star, or no, even the Sun. Oberleutnant Hanna-Justina Marseille. Commonly known by her callsign, 'Gelben 14', she was the staffelkapitän for *3 Staffel*, *Jagdgeschweder 27*, of the Karlsländer Luftwaffe.

Chapter 2 - Romagnan Logistics Base

"Oberleutnant Marseille? Ah, that's right, though when I met her, she was still just a cadet. It seems in the early stages of the Great War, those Karlsänders often placed cadets in units that would see real action. I was the base commander of the base in Ghazala at the time, and one day Oberleutnant Marseille comes in after crash landing, telling me about how she would shoot down 50 Neuroi craft, and so I had to lend her a car to get back to her own base."

At first, I had come here to this well-built Romagnan general to get some information. Well, actually just to get permission to get information. But the general decided to start talking on his own, turning it into an interview all by himself.

Well, I thought it might be interesting, so no matter. He really had a lot to say too.

"Yes, I even lent her a driver, who was also ecstatic at getting her signature. Of course, I never expected that signature to be painted on the body of the car."

The general laughed heartily.

"Why don't you take a photograph of that car later? Even with Africa as big as it is, I'm the only general to have ridden in a car that Oberleutnant Marseille signed, you know. How about it? Amazing, isn't it? I know, I can scarcely believe that the cadet back then is now a splendid officer herself, and even the savior of Africa."

Somehow, he seemed extremely proud just for having met Marseille.

"Well, ever since the first time I laid eyes on her, I knew she would become a great person. If not, I would never have lent her that car, you know!"

I wonder about that.

After thanking the general, I went to take a photo of the car; the general insisted on being in the photo as well. Well, maybe I'll be able to sell it to a Romagnan newspaper or something.

Chapter 3 - Karsland

As I left the logistics base to go look for Marseille's base, I remembered something I heard from a former Karlsländer Luftwaffe acquaintance of mine, Oberleutnant Gundula Rall, when I paid her a visit in hospital, shortly before I came here.

"In our Karlsländer Luftwaffe, we always have to write up our combat reports in the most excruciating detail. Who witnessed the attack, whether it was a fellow pilot, whether a unit on the ground confirmed it, and then details of how the attack progressed, the enemy unit's type, model number, number and type of shots fired, armament on hand... we had to write all of that down.

Oblt. Rall gestured animatedly with her hands as she told me about the details. From all the movement, I could tell exactly how much trouble it must have been to write those reports.

"So, if you read those reports, you'd find that Marseille only used an average of about 15 rounds to take down small Neuroi units. A normal magazine for the MG34 holds 50 rounds. Even a saddle-type magazine only holds 75 rounds. A normal witch might fire all of that in

just one burst. Marseille, though, she could take down five of them with a saddle-type. One time she went out with a 250-round case of ammunition, and came back with the new record of shooting down ten Neuroi in one go."

Rall continued her story, waving an imaginary machine gun she couldn't see herself as she made flying motions. She was so into the illusion that she even changed magazines at one point. Not being able to fly after being injured must have been hard on her.

"Those are truly astounding results. Normally just finding the core takes quite a few rounds, and after finding it, slamming magic bullets into the core takes even more rounds. But Marseille would usually find and destroy the core, all in one attack. It almost makes you think that the Neuroi's core moves to where Marseille is shooting, you know."

Rall flashed a charming smile as she continued. There was no telling how hard it might be to find the core, but in rare cases some witches had special abilities that could locate a core. Marseille had no such ability, but with her sharp eyesight, she could still find a core just from one look at the enemy.

"At this point, I'll bet there isn't a single witch near Marseille's level. She's a magnificent Witch, both in operating a Striker unit, and in marksmanship. Especially the latter, there's no doubt she's the best in Karlsland, or no, even among the entire Allied Human Forces."

A grimace appeared on Rall's face as she finished, perhaps in pain because of her spine injury, or because she wanted to recover and return to the battlefield as soon as possible.

Wishing Oblt. Rall a speedy recovery, I headed towards Africa.

Chapter 4 - Onward to the Base

Oblt. Rall's words played across my mind as I walked, and before I knew it, I was on the outskirts of Tobruk Fortress. Oblt. Marseille and her squadron were not far now.

I looked across the desert, and saw a lone Witch alight from a car, and begin walking this way. She was wearing a Karlslander Luftwaffe uniform. Could she be a member of Marseille's squadron?

When I asked her, she told me that she was in fact Marseille's wingman. What a stroke of luck.

I most definitely wanted to talk to her.

I gathered my journalistic composure, ready to find out how the people around Marseille thought of her, and anything else I might find out, with the end goal of meeting Marseille herself.

The girl's name was Liesa Pöttgen, a leutnant. She was still a young and playful girl, recently graduated from Officer Cadet School by my guess.

"Tina? Yeah, it can be really hard to stay on her tail sometimes."

When I asked who Tina was, she told me it was Oblt. Marseille's pet name. Most likely because of the Tina in Justina.

"Tina doesn't fight the way the rest of us think is normal, you see. Normally, we go at full speed when we're flying. But she'll reduce her throttle almost to the point where the engine stalls, and she'll even lower her landing gear to increase air resistence, all in order to get the tightest turning radius possible."

Lt. Liesa showed me what she meant by imitating Marseille with her hands. It was much easier to see how Marseille flew with her practical example. It wasn't something that could be put into words.

"She doesn't try to hit-and-run, but instead outmaneuvers her target in a battle of position. She'll get close to her target, then lower her own altitude to aim at the Neuroi from behind and under it. After all, a lot of small Neuroi craft have their core around their abdomen. "

She held her left hand up, representing the Neuroi in front, then twisted her right hand in a sharp turning dive ending up behind the left. Then, she hit her left hand with her right.

"That's how she always takes down those Neuroi with just one burst. After that, she'll push her throttle to the max again, and charge right through the enemy formation looking for her next prey. The way she fights makes her look like an air battle calculator or something."

Lt. Liesa explained the details of Marseille's tactics, a smile on her face the entire time. However, a wingman often had the tough job of confirming whether and where the Neuroi was shot down, all while following the lead pilot to drive off any approaching enemies, and keeping an eye on how the situation was developing. It probably was not a simple task to follow Marseille's lead, considering all the acrobatic maneuvering I was just told about.

Not to mention the sheer number of kills her wingman must have to confirm.

I asked what she thought about her own role as Marseille's wingman, and she beamed a wide smile.

"You have no idea how hard it is just to keep up with her. But you know, jobs as wonderful as flying with the world's top ace and protecting her back are really rare. And besides, I'm one of her fans. For all of us, everyone here in Africa, she's our idol, our star of hope. To be alone in the wide sky together with her, a position that wonderful is something anyone in the world would yearn for. Even if I were told that I could be relieved, I would definitely refuse."

I could see what she meant. It was a mission where the joys outweighed the hardships.

Even work as hard as being her wingman was enjoyable for her. I wanted to meet Oblt. Marseille more than ever now.

Saying she had to go take care of business to take care of in Tobruk, I took several photographs of Lt. Liesa, and continued heading towards the base. After having heard so many stories about Marseille, I wanted to meet her as soon as possible, and I naturally began walking faster.

The Witches' base was on a hill slightly removed from Tobruk. The barracks for the members seemed to be in a

valley nearby. As I headed there, I saw several signposts dotted about the road. Every single one of them was mounted on the sparse vegetation around the base, nailed to trees, or hanging off of shrubs; they were attached in all sorts of ways, but every one of them pointed in one direction.

As I walked up to one of them to take a closer look, I saw a simple message written there. "The World's Best Fighter Squadron." That told me all I needed to know about the team's morale.

Then, I noticed one signpost that was especially large. A long pillar, with several arrow-shaped signposts pointing in every direction attached to it.

Tripoli - 200 km. Alexandria - 600 km. Berlin - 2400 km . London 3000 km... and the last sign, which I read out, unthinkingly.

"Tokyo - 10000 km."

I see, so other people from Fuso have been here as well . It might be 10000 km away in a straight line, but in actual fact it took many times that going by sea. It could

have been a bit shorter if the Suez Canal could still be used, but that area was firmly under Neuroi control.

Chapter 5 - The Britannian Soldier

As I was looking at the signpost, a car's horn suddenly blared out from behind me. I turned around, and saw an idling Morris truck with Britannian Eighth Army markings. The Eighth Army, eh? Must be one of those Desert Rats tasked with holding the African front.

"Heading to the Marseille squadron? Would you like a lift?"

I climbed into the passenger seat gratefully.

The driver was a lance corporal in the Britannian Army. When I told him I was a war correspondent from Fuso, he immediately asked if I could take his picture as well. I took out my Leica II and snapped a photo of him smiling, hands on the steering wheel. Wherever I go, everyone wants to get their photo taken. Well, I brought plenty of film, so it didn't matter. I just had to be careful of the heat.

The photo captured the image of a boy who had only just become a young man, with a laugh free of any

worries. He told me how he idolized the Witch squadron when I asked. When the subject moved on to Marseille, his smile widened.

"Oh, Oberleutnant Marseille, she's a stunner, isn't she. Slim and tall, long legs like a model, that long white hair, and beautiful eyes as blue as the Mediterranean. She's that gorgeous, and on top of that is the top ace here in Africa, she's like a dream."

His expression looked like he was talking about a goddess he idolized. Perhaps that's what everyone did.

"Yes, of course. There are less than 30 Witches here in Africa, and you can count the number of air infantry among them on one hand. And yet, she protects the sky above every region of Africa."

When I asked him what he would do if one of the Witches was in an accident, he gave a very spirited reply.

"None of them, especially Oberleutnant Marseille, would ever get shot down! But, if for some reason that happened, all 12000 Britannian soldiers here in Tobruk would move out immediately to rescue them! Not just those in combat posts either, but even every last cook and cleaner! Even if it were deep in enemy territory in

Alexandria, we would charge right in without any hesitation, and definitely rescue our ladies!"

He spoke with such force that he even let go of the steering wheel. Although there wasn't much of a problem considering how straight the desert road was, without any opposing traffic, I still broke out in a cold sweat for a second. When I pointed that out to him, he immediately faced the front again and gripped the steering wheel, flustered. But even facing the front, he continued on.

I asked if he had ever thought of dating any of the witches, but he promptly refuted that.

"Since they're our, well, the saviors of the entire world. A regular enlisted soldier like me would never make a good match for one of them. That's just too far-fetched to ever hope for. I'm happy enough just catching a glimpse of them every now and then."

Is that so.

I've been to war zones all over the world, and asked the same question to all kinds of soldiers and officers, but I get the same answer no matter where I am.

Witches were scarce. They were the only ones fighting on the very front lines, holding back the enemy invasion.

However, here in Africa and on the Eastern Front, empty plains stretched all the way to the horizon. Under the right conditions, any enemy could be detected and engaged from far off.

The renowned Acht-acht, Karlsland's premier 88 mm anti-aircraft gun, could fire on a horizontal trajectory up to 10600 meters, and could hit an enemy unit from several kilometers away. It was not out of the realm of possibility for it destroy small land-based Neuroi. With luck and skill, an 88 could destroy an enemy beyond its firing range, before any risk of counterattack.

That's why Africa was one of places where male forces were still continuing the resistance. Perhaps that was another reason why there were so few witches supporting this battle.

Men like this Britannian soldier were fighting on the front, and together with the help of the Witches, they were defending the world together.

The youth interrupted my thoughts.

"Look, it's right over there."

I turned to look where he was pointing, and in between two hills, I could see several canvas tents.

"Right in the middle, that biggest tent, that's Oberleutnant Marseille's."

I jokingly asked if he could bring me all the way, but apparently without permission, male soldiers were forbidden to head along that road.

I had a special press permit, but it was unfortunate for him. I promised I would develop an extra set of photos for him once I got the chance, and he brightened again. Of course, he wanted Oblt. Marseille's photo.

Well, I suppose that was understandable.

Smiling, I jumped down from the truck. I waved back at the driver, and headed towards the tents.

Chapter 6 - Marseille

As I approached the tent that was pointed out, I saw that there was someone standing outside.

A tall and dark figure.

Getting closer, she appeared to be an armored ground infantryman, equipped with an armored Striker. It was rare to see black witches. She was the first one I ever saw.

"Halt."

The armored infantryman pointed her gun at me. It was even larger than the guns other armored infantryman usually carried. Rather than a gun, it would probably be called a cannon instead.

If anyone were hit with that, they'd be torn to shreds. Or actually, be blown away without a single trace remaining.

"Your permit."

I took out my press pass and base permit, and showed them to her. She scrutinized the documents, then stepped halfway into the tent and spoke to someone inside.

"Come in."

Seems like whatever she said worked. The guard turned towards me again, and pointed inside the tent. Bowing a bit, I entered the tent.

"Welcome to my palace."

Having come from the dazzling sunlight outside, and suddenly entering the dim interior of the tent, I could hardly see a thing. I stood in place for several seconds, and at last my eyes got accustomed to the dark. I took a look around at my surroundings, and found a magnificently furnished room, which almost looked like it had been airlifted straight from Paris.

The walls were just the canvas drapes of the tent, but there were several sandbags normally used to block small arms fire piled about like sofas, hiding the canvas walls. There were also several ammunition cases and parts boxes placed as tables and chairs. Most surprisingly , at the very back, there was even a simply-made bar and counter top.

It looked just like a café in Montmartre.

Finally, at the back of the room a beautiful woman was seated and looking at me, a wide smile on her face.

"I've heard you would like an interview. You've come a long way, all the way to the end of the world."

She was tall, with long, white hair, and long legs. Oberleutnant Marseille, whom I had heard so much about.

She looked just like I had imagined from the rumors.

Prouder than anyone, more cheerful than anyone, overflowing with more zeal and life than anyone, more romantic than anyone. She was a witch like no other, a heroine straight from an adventure story, or a star in a movie.

Although she called this the end of the world, Fuso could also be said to be at the end of the world, compared to Europe. When I told her this, she laughed loudly.

"Indeed, Fuso is extremely far from Europe. However, Fuso is a civilized country as well, no? Compare it to this

desert, where not even the faintest trace of civilization can be found. Even the glory of ancient Rome disappeared within the vast expanse of this never-ending sand. And now, even the few nomads originally living here have been frightened off by the Neuroi, running away to lands far off. This place is the true end of the world."

So that's what her reasoning was.

"Ah, in any case, would you care for a drink?"

She called to the outside of the tent, asking the giant ground infantry witch there to come in.

"Let me introduce you. This is my orderly, Matilda. She is from Transvaal, and came to serve me here as my orderly, never having once laid eyes on me, because 'God told me to go to your side.'"

Transvaal was an area at the south end of Africa. It was quite a journey to come all the way from all that way .

"The god her people believe in takes the form of an eagle, flying in the north. 'Serve her', is essentially what she was told to do."

At that moment, Matilda joined the conversation.

"Eagles are the servants of our God. One day, God took to the sky as an eagle. Soon, it led me here, flying here before my very eyes."

Marseille smiled softly as she listened to Matilda's story.

"And I am grateful that you are here, Matilda. However, I no longer need your protection today, so make me a dry martini."

Matilda took off her simple armored Striker, and headed behind the counter of the bar.

"What would you like today?"

"Ah, how about a Monty?"

"Understood."

I watched as Matilda quickly took out several bottles, the nimbleness of her movements contrasting with her large body. Would even the best bars in Paris have as wide a selection of alcohol as what was here?

"How about you? Don't tell my you won't join me, now."

I asked for whatever she was having. I had to ask what a Monty was though.

"Ah, Monty is a Britannian general, who recently took up duties here in Africa. He is in command of the Eighth Army."

And why was it also the name of a cocktail?

"Well, it's done, so why don't you take a drink first?"

She handed me my glass, which had a small olive. I took a small sip, and could tell immediately that it was much stronger than a normal martini. The ratio of gin was obviously extremely high.

"That's right, the ratio between gin and Vermouth is 15 to 1. And as for Monty, without a 15 to 1 ratio between our strength and the enemy, he will never attack."

So that's why it was called a Monty. But it should be quite difficult to have 15 times the force of the Neuroi.

"Why, of course. Which is why we have not attacked even a single time."

It seemed to be an oft-repeated joke on base. Perhaps it was just the troops joking at the caution of the brass, or maybe it was actually true.

There was none of the grimness here that could be seen on most battlefields.

Even my own homeland of Fuso was engaged in heavy fighting, not only through the European Expeditionary Fleet, but also in Siberia where the Neuroi suddenly appeared. I had been covering the war there before I came here to Africa, but because there was a very real threat that our own homeland would be attacked, the troops there had been much more somber.

Then, there was the Eastern Front.

As part of the counter-offensive to retake Karlsland, a massive invasion from the north known as Operation Barbarossa was being carried out. However, hard battles were still being fought all over the front, and the number of severely wounded witches like Lt. Rall was increasing all the time.

The campaign was moving one step forward, one step back. Or maybe one step forward, three steps back, so to speak. The recent start of earnest support from Liberion was likely a welcome boon to the troops there.

Nevertheless, by no means was the war here in Africa decided. Just holding the current front was all the troops could do, let alone attacking.

I suppose that would mean that it was all just a part of Marseille's natural cheer.

With that thought in mind, I continued with the interview.

Finally, after an entire night of talking, I had heard all manner of talk from Marseille. Each time we got into one topic, that would bring up something else to talk about. Just talking about the birth of this great ace, how she came to this country and began fighting was enough to write an entire book.

For many aces, or actually not just aces, but for every single last person fighting, there are similar kinds of drama in their lives.

And furthermore, in the hearts of every person here was the desire to protect this world, and protect their loved ones. So long as we remembered that, this desert could also be seen as part of our beautiful world.

Before we parted for the night, Marseille handed me a small shovel, in case I needed to relieve myself.

"Go out from the tent, and walk directly forward 50 paces. Turn 90 degrees to the right, walk another 20 paces, and use this shovel."

Of course, it was night so no one was around to see, so I did as she said. I don't know if there were any witches around that could see even on a night like that though.

However, I never thought that I'd find a new signpost the next morning. In front of the tent, there was a small sign with the words "Forward 50 paces, right 20 paces" sticking out from the sand.

I followed the directions, and saw another message on a sign, together with an arrow pointing down.

"Hailing from a distant land 10,000 km away, our comrade from Fuso dealt with the call of nature here."

Taking a look around the area, I saw numerous other signs with similar messages. Obviously, that was when I realized I had been made the butt of one of her jokes.

Chapter 7 - Glory's Afterglow

The next morning, September 1st, we headed off to watch as Oberleutnant Marseille flew a sortie. I spotted her putting on her favorite Striker, the Bf109F4/TrOP, next to some trucks at the side of the airstrip cutting through the desert.

The F4/TrOP, with a higher maximum speed and better dogfighting capabilities compared to the E model, could undertake particularly challenging acrobatic maneuvers. It was also equipped with an air filter for use in the tropics.

Marseille had told me earlier that it was precisely because of the extreme maneuverability of this Striker that she liked it. Other Strikers would always move in small but unexpected ways, but the F4/TrOP would move exactly the way she wanted.

There was little change in the weather here in northern Africa as the first signs of autumn crept up on summer. It was just as clear today as it was yesterday.

Even though it was still so early in the morning, the sun was already blazing hot, hot enough to feel my skin burning. A comfortingly cool breeze blew over from the seaside.

Marseille drained a large bottle of milk as if it were just another day, and handed the empty bottle down to Matilda. Then, she took off the sunglasses she typically wore to protect her eyes from the intense sunlight.

Milk and sunglasses, two things that one could not do without in Africa. I've even heard that they raise good milk cows near the base specifically for their milk.

Finished with her preparations, Marseille slung a large ammunition case behind her back and picked up her MG34. Supposedly, the gun was specially modified with improved cooling for use in desert climates, but I couldn't see much of a difference from the appearance.

Nearby, mechanics bustled all over, making last minute preparations for the flight. Marseille, gestured with her left hand, and a mechanic started the air pump for the magic engine. The engine revved up into life, and a piercing whine flooded the area.

As the tachometer reading increased, a technician displayed the count on his fingers for Marseille to see. The air cut indicator flashed at 3000 RPM. The technicians immediately detached the electric supply cable and air hose, and pushed away the frame supporting Marseille at the waist.

A white flag was waved at the far end of the airstrip - permission to take off.

Marseille began to slowly approach the runway.

"Why don't you come visit me when I get back?"

I stared at Marseille as I tried to think of what she could want from me. However, with one last smile in my direction, she roared down the runway and into the sky.

Following right behind her was, of course, Leutnant Liesa. She took off waving happily in our direction.

It sure is a lot of effort just to go on a sortie here in Africa, where lift-off propulsion systems aren't used.

Marseille's long hair trailed out behind her like a airplane vapor trail, and even like a powerful eagle, flying upward higher and higher into the sky.

Long ago, I also aspired to fly through the skies like Marseille. Equipping a Striker unit, and heading to a different world, higher than anyone, faster than anyone. But, that world is closed to me now. I no longer had what it took to fly through those strife-filled skies.

"Are you alright?"

Matilda asked from beside me. I must have been crying. Marseille's flying form was just too beautiful, and could also be so fleeting, as I only knew too well. As I told Matilda this, she unexpectedly nodded gravely.

"The envoy of the Eagle is loved by God, and flies by God's side. And you fear that someday she will also return to God forever."

Yes, we witches are always in the gods' territory. The sky was the world of birds and the gods. And Marseille was the image of both.

"Altitude 3500, enemy sighted!"

Marseille's voice came from a nearby receiver.

"Liesa, we will intercept!"

"This is Liesa, enemy formation consists of small flyers, Hierax class, 10 units."

Lt. Liesa reported the details of the encounter for us back at base. The Hierax class's air combat worthiness was far below that of a Witch.

They could be an annoyance if they came all at once in large numbers, but they were slow and awkward in flight, and even I used to treat them as sitting ducks. With only those as enemies, it would be an easy victory.

"Element leader is circling to the left behind and below enemy formation, ah, direct hit!"

"0820, one enemy craft down, 8 klicks south-south-east of El Imad."

A huge cheer erupted among the crew at the announcement. Once again, their much respected leader had increased her victory count.

"Continuing, 0830, same location, another enemy down."

"0833, 1 klick south-east of Imad, yet another down!"

The next moment, Lt. Liesa's voice came from the radio again, this time with a tone of urgency.

"Six enemy craft, Chelidon class high-speed light flyers , coming in from 6 o'clock!"

The Chelidon class, with a streamlined design giving it a high maximum speed and excellent maneuverability, was a formidable enemy. With six of them heading towards them from the rear in a surprise attack, would they be alright?

"Liesa, get away from my rear."

Marseille's voice.

I was immediately reminded of what I had heard last night.

"So long as a keep an eye out on the enemy's cannons, I won't be in any danger. The only way I'll be in any danger is if I make a mistake and get caught by surprise."

Edging up close to the enemy, dodging at the last moment, and swinging back right behind the enemy... that was her specialty. I suppose that's why a wingman at her back would only get in the way.

"Hard left!"

Lt. Liesa's voice. Perhaps Marseille had overshot her target.

"0839, 2 klicks east-south-east of El Imad, enemy down ."

"Remaining enemies are breaking off. We will return to base as well."

Marseille's calm voice came through the radio receiver.

In the mere twenty minutes since the beginning of hostilities, Marseille had shot down four enemy flyers. That must have been par for the course for her.

Marseille returned to base at 9:14. We waved, but she was as composed as she was yesterday. As the technicians came up to welcome her back warmly one after the other, the remaining technicians prepared for the next attack. The munitions technician handed her a new ammunition belt and gun, while the engineers inspected the engines and filled them with new coolant, and the electrical engineers checked to make sure all the circuits were working.

Matilda hurried over with a sun-shade, as Marseille prepared for the next sortie, still in her Striker.

"Just four down, huh. I'll bet that wasn't enough for you."

I walked up to her side and handed her a towel, which she accepted with a small self-deprecating grin.

"The day's only just getting started, and those Neuroi will be back. There's a long way to go yet."

"Refit complete!"

The technicians finished their work and backed away from the Striker. Marseille tossed the towel back to me, checked her preparations, and took off into the air again.

As we all watched her fly off again, the munitions team started murmuring among themselves excitedly.

"Look at this, the Oberleutnant only used 60 rounds!"

One of the techs pulled the nearly unused ammunition belt from the ammo case, and I took a picture of the surprised techs as they each inspected it in turn. I had forgotten to take pictures during the first flight, and while I had decided to make sure I took pictures this time around, I would still have quite a few shots left over for other things.

She only used 60 rounds to bring down four flyers. It was just like Leutnant Rall said: Fifteen rounds per craft, with machine-like precision.

"Right, 10 klicks, enemy sighted!"

"Enemy Hierax, numbering approximately thirty!"

The reports came from the radio receiver in quick succession.

Outnumbered 15 to 1, the exact opposite of Monty's ideal conditions. However, Marseille did not even break a sweat at the numbers.

"Follow behind me, Liesa!"

"Roger."

Only static came through the radio after that.

All the personnel at base waited for the results of the battle with bated breath, not even a single whisper going around the area.

"Enemy, in defensive ring formation!"

"We will break through into the center!"

"Roger."

The enemy was flying in a ring-shaped formation, so that they could defend themselves on all sides. However, if Marseille could punch through into the center of the ring, their formation would become useless. Of course, it

would be impossible to actually fly straight into that mass of enemy craft without real courage.

"One down, and... that's another one!"

"Tch."

"Enemy formation, breaking apart!"

Apparently, the enemy had realized their foolishness in maintaining formation after getting two flyers shot down in quick succession. By scattering and laying down fire on Marseille from all directions, the Neuroi would have the advantage.

"Six of them to the left!"

"Alright, punch through there!"

However, Marseille was different. Even after the enemy scattered, she took the initiative and continued with her relentless attack.

"Third one!"

"Enemy, shifting to the east! The rest of them are breaking formation too!"

She was most likely taking out the smaller detachment before the main formation could catch up. I could only gather a fragmented idea of what was going on from the sparse information coming in.

In any case, she had pursued the six flyers that had gone east, and apparently had shot down four of them.

"Enemy, out of sight."

"No, wait, below you."

They must have found them again.

"We're going in for a pass."

"Roger."

More static.

"Direct hit! That's another one down!"

Lt. Liesa's jubilant voice broke the silence.

"Alright, we should return to base soon."

"Yes, roger that!"

With that, everyone at the landing field began to move , ending the tense silence that had been there up to that point.

I also planned on taking a photo of Marseille coming in for the landing, and changed film.

As I was doing so, a report came in from the radio again.

"There's still one more."

"We must not have noticed this one, it's close."

The airfield went silent once more.

"It's down!"

In just ten minutes of fighting, Marseille had shot down 8 of the Neuroi flyers. Skill of terrifying proportions, so skilled that Lt. Liesa could not even get a single shot off. That's who Marseille was.

Looking up into the sky, I watched as Marseille returned to base with a relaxed landing. I captured every detail on my camera as she glided onto the runway, and was congratulated by the technicians who rushed forward to help.

As the cheering went on, I noticed a black car stop by the side of the runway. A general stepped out of the car.

Marseille, who was now out of her Striker unit, stood in front of the general and saluted.

"Sir, on this day, our squadron was deployed twice, and brought down twelve enemy flyers."

Hearing this, the general grinned broadly.

"Really now, and how many did you personally shoot down?"

"Twelve of them, sir."

A surprised look passed quickly over the general's face . He shook Marseille's hand, then got back into the car without saying another word.

In the end, there were two more sorties, and Marseille returned to base that evening with five more victories.

Seventeen in one day, that was Marseille's final total for the day. At noon, I had been brought to the location of the first crash, and took several pictures of the crater. The actual craft had already dissipated into light and disappeared, but there was still a great scar left on the land. However, I suppose the wind would blow again soon, and cover it all under the sand once more.

An ephemeral battle, leaving nothing behind, just like a mirage; that was the nature of these desert battles.

However, in this land far removed from civilization, one courageous person continued to fight on.

This fight of hers was like one straight from the realms of mythology.

And this one warrior had a motto: "Never look back, and keep moving forward."

Of course, even this record I've made is probably nothing but old history to her though.

Epilogue

I said farewell to Africa. I developed all of the film I took in Tobruk, where I was also able to send out copies to various people I had met.

Of course, I laughed when I saw that pictures of Marseille were enlarged very quickly and made into posters.

The picture of the Romagnan general was also bought by a newspaper. Apparently they thought it would be perfect for raising morale back home. Having made some money, I suppose I'll buy some Fuso *sake* alcohol I found among some supplies from Fuso, and have it sent to Marseille's base.

After all, I never got the chance to try a *sake* martini.

After having watched Marseille and her witches in action, I began to wonder if perhaps I could take to the air as a witch once again.

Air combat might be impossible, but I could at least fly . Pushing the Neuroi out of this world of ours does not depend solely on those fighting themselves. Spreading the word of all of these heroines to people all over the

world, or teaching others how to fly... all of these are also worthwhile battles.

To do what I can do... I feel that I've found the wings of my new self.

Oberleutnant Marseille, let's meet once again. And when we do, we'll fly through these skies, together.